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AUTHOR	Hampton, Sally; Ouellette, Mark
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ABSTRACT

Learning to read and write is critical to a child's success in school and adult life. One of the best predictors of whether children will function competently in school and, later, contribute to the increasingly literate society is their progress in reading and writing. For this reason, the 1985 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing scores generated considerable alarm about students' apparent lack of writing proficiency. In response to these low NAEP scores, much research has been done on how to develop a quality literacy program for all students. A great deal is now known about how young children learn to read and write and how to help them develop the requisite literacy skills in the early years. Policymakers wanting to improve on the results of the latest NAEP writing assessments may want to help schools incorporate this knowledge into the curriculum. These strategies can assist in achieving this objective: include writing assessments in current primary-level reading assessments; improve preservice instruction for new primary-grade teachers; support professional development for experienced teachers; and connect technology initiatives with written instruction. (Contains 13 notes.) (NKA)

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Issue Brief

NGA Center for BEST PRACTICES

Education Policy Studies Division
Contact: Dane Linn, 202/624-5359 or at
dlinn@nga.org

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Making Writing Instruction Work*

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Summary

Learning to read and write is critical to a child's success in school and adult life. One of the best predictors of whether children will function competently in school and, later, contribute to the increasingly literate society is their progress in reading and writing. For this reason, the 1985 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing scores generated considerable alarm about students' apparent lack of writing proficiency.

In response to those low NAEP scores, much research has been done on how to develop a quality literacy program for all students. A great deal is now known about how young children learn to read and write and how to help them develop the requisite literacy skills in the early years. One of the significant obstacles has been linking this new research with the activities of teachers and other practitioners. Policymakers wanting to improve on the results of the latest NAEP writing assessments may want to help schools incorporate this knowledge into the curriculum. These strategies can assist in achieving this objective:

- include writing assessments in current primary–level reading assessments;
- improve preservice instruction for new primary–grade teachers;
- support professional development for experienced teachers; and
- connect technology initiatives with written instruction.

The Current Status of Writing in Schools

In 1985 NAEP scores generated national concern about students' lack of writing proficiency. Schools were encouraged to implement writing initiatives to remedy student deficiencies. Schools tried various approaches, including assigning writing projects, holding summer institutes, and encouraging more writing across the curriculum. Yet the limited knowledge and resources available to teachers on how to teach writing effectively limited the success of these efforts to improve writing proficiency.

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As the volume of research has increased during the past two decades, so has the knowledge about what constitutes good writing instruction. The quality of the research also has improved, but much of what has been learned has not made its way to teachers and practitioners. Consequently, teaching practices tied to outdated views of literacy development and obsolete learning theories are still prevalent in many classrooms. Existing practices are not particularly effective for primary-grade children and are even less suitable for children in preschool and kindergarten.

This lack of connection between research and practice continues to feed the "crisis" in student writing proficiency first documented in the mid-1980s. At least three-fourths of students in the grades tested on the latest NAEP writing assessment are not proficient in writing. Moreover, 16 percent of fourth and eighth graders and 22 percent of twelfth graders have not mastered even basic writing skills.[1]

	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	At or Above Proficient	Advanced
Grade 4	16%	84%	23%	1%
Grade 8	16%	84%	27%	1%
Grade 12	22%	78%	22%	1%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *NAEP 1998 Writing Report Card for the Nation and the States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

The Link between Writing Instruction and Reading Instruction

One strategy to improve writing skills is to teach better reading skills.[2] Writing challenges students to actively think about words as abstract representations of thought and, therefore, to become more critical thinkers.[3] As states implement kindergarten through grade three (K–3) reading assessments, policymakers may want to consider making the assessments a flexible tool that can develop literacy skills.[4]

Connecticut uses two reading tests in each of grades four, six, and eight. One of the tests developed by Harcourt Education Measurement, with the help of a Connecticut Statewide Advisory Committee composed of teachers and reading and language arts specialists, requires students to read passages of original works and then respond to multiple-choice and open-ended questions. In examining why Connecticut had improved its reading and writing scores, researchers discovered that the districts achieving the greatest improvement on the NAEP identified the Connecticut Mastery Tests as a major factor in helping them focus their instruction.[5]

Preservice for Teachers

Excellent teaching is one of the most effective means to prevent reading and writing difficulties. A recent study of more than 1,000 school districts found that every additional dollar spent on developing the qualifications of teachers netted improvements in student achievement greater than any other use of school resources.[6] Teachers need to be knowledgeable about the scientific foundations of literacy, but the average teacher takes only three–semester hours or one course on how to teach literacy. Policymakers wanting to improve literacy instruction may want to consider increasing preservice requirements, because successful teachers need to know about language structure and techniques for teaching it to children within the study of quality literature.[7]

Idaho recently required new teachers seeking certification to pass an exam based on new literacy standards. The state also requires kindergarten through eighth-grade teachers to complete three credits in state-approved literacy instruction for teacher recertification every five years.[8]

The **Massachusetts** Department of Education requires early childhood and K–3 teachers to demonstrate knowledge of early literacy and children's literature and the language arts. This includes at least 18 semester units in early childhood development, subject-matter material, and curriculum for special needs students.

Professional Development for Teachers

To understand the complex literacy process, teachers must have a strong background in cognitive behavioral and social sciences, as well as in the humanities, and be aware of current research. Primary grade teachers must know a great deal about children's development, how they learn, and what they can do. They also must have content knowledge in literature, math, and science. In addition, they must have a vast array of teaching techniques to meet the different needs of their students. Finally, they must be able to evaluate their students' progress

With this in mind, teacher education must be viewed as a career-long undertaking, rather than an effort that is completed upon receipt of a bachelor's or master's degree. Even the best undergraduate or graduate education program cannot fully prepare teachers for the complex job of teaching literacy and the diverse needs they will face in their classrooms.[9] State policymakers are taking a more active role in providing resources and opportunities for professional development that are useful and relevant to school-specific needs.

Colorado's performance-based standards provide professional development opportunities focusing on writing instruction. The standards serve as a framework for all initial licensure teacher preparation programs and require all teachers to demonstrate their ability to:

- develop oral English proficiency in students;
- develop sound writing practices in students, including language usage, punctuation, capitalization, sentence structure, and spelling;
- understand the relationships among reading, writing, and oral language;
- lead vocabulary development; and
- teach the structure of standard English.

California Governor Gray Davis established the Governor's Elementary Reading Initiative to develop an interconnected set of professional development and support programs for beginning and noncredentialed K–3 teachers. The program provides a minimum of 120 hours of intensive professional development and instruction to help teachers analyze student reading results and determine individual levels of reading proficiency, monitor progress, and adjust instruction to improve reading performance.

Teachers are invited to participate on school teams that also include experienced teachers, a reading specialist, and a school administrator. School teams may also include district

administrators; resource specialist program teachers; language development specialists; and preschool teachers, if participating schools have an on-site preschool program. The team participation provides another means of support and guidance for the beginning and noncredentialed teachers. These teachers receive a $1,000 stipend upon completing the requirements of the Elementary Reading Initiative.

Technology and Writing Instruction

States have made a tremendous investment in wiring schools for computer use. Absent well-trained teachers who can use technology as an integral part of teaching and learning, computers will be nothing more than high-technology gadgetry. States face the challenges of building the professional competency of their teachers and of ensuring that teachers know how to use the new technology and integrate it into instruction at all grade levels. Many teachers feel ill-prepared to effectively use technology in the classroom. In a recent survey of teachers, no more than 20 percent considered themselves "very prepared" to integrate educational technology into their classroom.[10] Utilizing technology is more than purchasing software and installing it—teachers need to understand how to use the software to enhance their classroom practices.

West Virginia's Basic Skills/Computer Education Program began in 1990 and has placed more than 29,000 computers in kindergarten through grade six classrooms across the state. The program assists teachers in incorporating technology into their teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics instruction. An independent team of researchers cited the program for its effective use of technology, which led directly to significant gains in reading, language arts, and mathematics. The study noted that educational gains were significant for all groups and all genders, with the strongest gains achieved by female, rural, and economically disadvantaged learners.

Many states are addressing the issue of professional competency. **Tennessee**'s ConnecTEN provides instructional technology training and support for educators by offering seminars and workshops at three instructional technology centers in Lexington, Nashville, and Knoxville. At each center, educators learn basic computer training and new ways to integrate technology into the classroom. They also learn how to use the Internet and other online resources and how to access other learning opportunities.

What States Can Do

Most states have already made tremendous strides in developing and implementing reading initiatives. If they want to improve literacy in the state, policymakers may want to consider incorporating writing instruction into these reading initiatives. These strategies could prove useful.

- ***Strengthen teacher preparation programs and licensure regulation with principles of effective literacy instruction.*** Teacher preparation and licensure must adequately prepare new teachers for the rigors of teaching writing to students with diverse needs and learning styles. New teachers could be required to demonstrate those abilities before they can earn a license.
- ***Support professional development based on research-proven classroom strategies and the use of new technology in the classroom.*** Professional development of in-service teachers

should provide teachers with the tools they need to be more effective in the classroom. Educators and researchers have learned much about what constitutes effective professional development. Writing instruction must be coupled with effective training for teachers to develop the knowledge and skills they need to adequately teach writing.

- ***Include writing as a part of reading assessment.*** Assessment has not kept pace with current knowledge about reading and writing.[11] Research has shown that developing reading and writing together produces greater benefits than does focusing on just one of these components of literacy. Assessments need to incorporate this new understanding of literacy development and must be able to incorporate new knowledge as it becomes available.[12]
- ***Recognize the importance of developing long-term plans for utilizing technology in the classroom***. It is important to provide ongoing planning and financial support for incorporating current technology into teacher preparation and professional development. Simply purchasing computers for the classroom and connecting them to a network will fail to meet student needs. Only through rigorous technology standards, high-quality educators, and states' unwavering funding commitments will education technology change literacy instruction.[13]

Endnotes

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[3] J.A. Langer and A.N. Applebee, *How Writing Shapes Thinking* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1987).

[4] North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL), *Principles of Effective Literacy Assessment* (Oak Brook, Ill.: NCREL, 1997), at <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/cntareas/reading/li7lk5.htm>.

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[6] National Research Council, *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999), 122.

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[9] National Research Council, 123.

[10] Laurie Lewis, et al., *Teacher Quality: A Report on the Preparation and Qualifications of Public School Teachers*, (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, January 1999), at: <http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=1999080>.

[11] North Central Regional Education Laboratory.

[12] Ibid.

[13] "Education Technology: Changing the Way America Learns," *Issue Brief* (August 9, 1999), National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Washington, D.C., at <http://www.nga.org/Pubs/IssueBriefs/1999/Sum990719EdTech.asp>.

*This *Issue Brief* was written by Sally Hampton of the National Center for Education and the Economy and Mark Ouellette of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.